DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 340 044 CS 213 128

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TITLE Seizing the Power of Personal Journal Writing.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 17p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; *Journal Writing; *Learning Processes; *Self Expression; *Student Journals; *Writing Attitudes; *Writing Instruction; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS *Personal Writing; Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

The personal journal is a combination of class notebook and diary, a repository of entries which are recorded on a regular basis, are ungraded, and which remain confidential. As an instructional tool, the journal is virtually limitless. Studies have demonstrated the practical applications of journal writing for educators in the following areas: (1) as a potential tool for the development of language processes; (2) as a tool for development of organizational abilities; (3) as an opportunity to apply knowledge gained in academic and social settings; and (4) as a possible facilitator of positive attitudes towards literacy. In addition educational theorists report that personal journals offer writers a place to reflect on their roles within cultural groups--a place for introspection. Two primary implications for instruction may also be derived from the discussion of these studies. First, journal writing should be a voluntary activity in which students are encouraged to participate. Second, students may benefit from increased opportunities to make decisions regarding school, social, and independent activities. By increasing decision-making opportunities while providing and encouraging reflection through journal writing, teachers are facilitating students' awareness of selves within a culture. This knowledge develops simultaneously with increased reading/writing abilities, and possible, positive attitudes toward literacy. (Twenty-one references are attached.) (PRA)

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Seizing the Power of Personal Journal Writing

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1991

Running Head: Power of Personal Journals

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ABSTRACT

Educational theorists report that personal journals offer writers a place to reflect on roles within cultural groups - a place for introspection. For the purposes of this paper, the personal journal is defined as a combination of class notebook and diary, a repository of entries which are recorded on a regular basis, are ungraded, and which remain confidential. The following pages include a discussion of several practical applications of journal writing for educators, including (a) potential for development of language processes, (b) as a tool for development of organizational abilities, (c) as an opportunity to apply knowledge gained in academic and social settings, and (d) as a possible facilitator of positive attitudes toward literacy.

"...So I Write it Out":

Seizing the Power of Personal Journal Writing

> I write about fights and places I went to during the summer and stuff like that. Like the summer I was running track and I won three trophies and a ribbon. I'd been wanting to run track for the longest time. The first day the coach was hollering at me and stuff because I wasn't doing the right things....when I got hom my step-mother was hollering because I wasn't doing the right things, and my mama say, 'Don't worry,' because it was just my first year. And then I started getting excited because I liked the running. I wrote all this in my journal at home...I wrote about my grandpa because he might die pretty soon because he can't speak that well and get up and stuff like that. He very old, so I like to take care of him. He talks to me about dying soon. It makes me feel bad so I write it out--
> Rodney 1989

These are the words of a 13 year old fourth grade black male who enjoys journal writing at home and school. They imply a powerful message for educators: that journals are a place for young learners to explore their cultural existence and the ways in which their presence influences the lives of others. The following pages present a review of journal writing in the learning process, as well as its use in personal introspection.

Autrey (1987) provides a comprehensive account of the development of the personal journal. What we now call a journal was originally preceded by the <u>private chronicle</u>, an ancient literary form. The journal has also been

referred to as a commonplace book, (or a repository of observations) which was used in Greek and Roman rhetorical education. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, educators used journals (also called diaries or scrap books) as memory aids. In 1965, Rohmann authored a book entitled Pre-Writing: The Stage of Discovery in the Writing Process, which brought widespread attention to the use of journals in academic settings (Lowenstein, 1987). According to Fulwiler, (1987) journals are not diaries, nor are they class notebooks -- they are a combination of both.

A Model of The Role of Affect in Reading

Henk and Holmes (1988) have revised Mathewson's (1985) model of reading which includes the affective component of attitude toward content as an important part of the reader's ability to comprehend. The revised model illustrates that the reading outcome includes three factors: reader, text, and task.

It is the ego-involvement of the reader which has been found to be most influential in cases where the reader has a high degree of involvement with the topic. The next component, text, includes consistent or inconsistent attitude versus an impartial attitude. Again, a consistent attitude will typically involve a great amount of ego-involvement, which can either reduce or enhance comprehension. The task consists of several sub-components: external/internal factors, immediate/delayed responses, high level/low level information, judgement of an issue, and recall of an issue. When the focus of the response is internal, attitude is significantly affected. When the response is delayed, the resulting distortion of information is significant. If the information is generalized, then it is more easily distorted, resulting in little or no

significance. Finally, judgement is significant in cases where the reading task is internally focused. As the model illustrates, comprehension is a complicated process which is easily influenced by a number of internal and external factors. These factors can combine in sometimes unpredictable ways, producing a wide range of responses within a given group.

Henk and Holmes' (1988) model may be applied to journal writing in that it implies that understanding is determined, to a large extent, by the learner's personal involvement with the topic. Since personal journal writing is typically related to personal roles within a given group - and is a result of group messages about behavior - the writer is reflecting and problem solving with a high level of ego-involvement. In Henk and Holmes' terms, it is the internal focus of the task which influences judgement, and the personal journal entry offers a confidential (safe) place to explore judgement.

The Role of Journal Writing in the Learning Process

Another aspect of journals is that they allow the writer to gather and organize thoughts, feelings and experiences. D'Arcy (1987) states that journals can enable pupils to collect ideas and information, thereby giving writers the opportunity to rediscover what is already known. The act of journal writing generates questions and allows honest expressions of feelings. It is the internal conversation between the writer and self-audience which provides the writer with a personal map of progress. In addition, journal writing does not demand a special writing style, thus the writer is free from judgement concerning the appropriateness of recorded thoughts.

As an instructional tool, the journal is virtually limitless. The

aesthetic value to students would be difficult to measure accurately, if at all. Studies have been conducted, however, which demonstrate the import which journal writing brings to the development of language processes and in facilitating a transfer of knowledge from one area to another. Halberg states (Fulwiler, 1987):

> The use of personal journals for the teaching of writing is far more powerful and far-reading in its effects than is generally recognized. When it works to improve a students' writing skills, it is also working to change that student's enduring attitudes, values and sense of personal identity. These deeper personal consequences of the activity of journal work should not be avoided or minimized. (p. 28)

Macrorie (1987) is also an advocate of journal writing as a way to enhance thinking skills and the application of what is learned in academic settings, stating the following (Fulwiler, 1987):

> ... the conclusion of most of the teachers and students using them (journals) is that they get people thinking, they help them test their own experience against the ideas of many others - the authorities they're studying, their teachers, their fellow students. As they become more and more engaged, they often write more clearly, and their journal entries display fewer mistakes in spelling, punctuation and grammar, although the teachers have taken pains to let them know at the very beginning that they will not be graded on the mechanics of writing. For the majority of these students, journals are <u>yes</u> places. (Forward)

The emphasis on expression of thought, combined with the lack of overt concern for surface structure, makes the journal a relaxed form of writing - a yes place. The resulting natural improvement in students' abilities to organize and record thoughts allows a transfer of knowledge, both personal and public, to occur.

The development of writing skills as related to participation in journal writing was examined by Zamel (1987). Results indicated that skilled writers view writing as a generative process, while unskilled writers are often distracted by surface level features and frequently do not recognize the exploratory nature of writing. These results do not agree with theorists' views concerning the advantages of journal writing as related to skills development. Halberg (1987), D'Arcy (1987), Macrorie (1987), Barnes and Smithsom (1986), and Lamb (1988) suggest that journal writing frees the student from undue attention to surface structure and encourages transfer from life to academics (a form of organization of knowledge) and that this results in an increased ability to express thoughts appropriately. Other attempts to establish a positive effect on skill development through journal writing have been attempted. Bridges (1986) asked subjects to participate in four modes of autobiographical writing. The goal was to improve students' abilities to write coherently and logically through practice. Three raters used an holistic rating scale to measure writing growth. It was determined that the autobiographical writing modes were successful in improving students' writing in terms of coherence and logic. These findings indicate that as the writer continues to manipulate ideas, the links between those ideas begin to be illuminated and the mechanical skills required to express connections are

concurrently developed, thus enhancing the writer's capacity to express thoughts. This in itself is an internally motivating phenomenon in that it makes knowledge of self and the world more meaningful to the learner.

When implementing any instructional activity, task appropriateness is an important consideration. Cothern (1989) cautions educators against mandating journal writing for all students, based on results of a study of fourth grade students' attitudes toward reading and writing prior to and following an extended period of personal journal writing. Post-assessments revealed that students demonstrating positive attitudes toward reading and writing on pre-assessments demonstrated significant decreases in reading and writing attitudes following the journal writing treatment. However, students initially demonstrating negative attitudes toward reading experienced significant increases in positive attitudes toward reading at the end of the study. Free responses from participants supported the notion that personal journal writing is not, for all students, the best use of school time. Those who demonstrated a decrease in attitudes expressed that journaling required energy (and time) which could have been more appropriately devoted to other school tasks. Free responses of students experiencing increases in positive attitudes revealed that journals facilitated growth in reading and writing skills, offered students a place to safely express emotions, and served as a way to study human nature.

Rose (1988) approaches journal writing from a cultural perspective, viewing writing as an act of human understanding. Journals can help to explain how and why individuals choose writing as a mode of cultural interaction. Through examination of journal writing practices and processes, it becomes

apparent that journal writing is a transforming act which can be used in the study of humans. Welch (1987) extends this notion to imply that journal writing acts as a bridge between literacy and orality. Before entering formal training students possess abilities in writing, due to the fact that the transition from spoken to written word is naturally occurring. The role of journal writing as a bridge to other forms of writing assumes that all students can apply the following assumption to their writing:

1. On entering school all students are experts at manipulating spoken discourse, and
2. They are members of a discourse community which includes a common store of experiences on which all members are authorities. This knowledge shifts writer/reader expertise to the issue of writing coherently.

As Macrorie (1987) and Halberg (1987) illustrate, the journal is a natural forum for students to record knowledge in a meaningful manner. The act of employing what is known about language in conveying culturally bound and shared ideas is a positive use of language which may result in stimulating a desire to continue the practice.

Assessment of writing maturity, and the role of prior knowledge as expressed in personal narrative have been of interest to researchers. Lamb (1988) examined narratives which were collected during the 1984 study conducted by International Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) data. It was established that students who drew on personal experiences produced livelier, fresher essays. Rose (1988) extended the investigation of prior knowledge to include the role/influence of culture. As expressed in personal narrative written by college students, entries revealed that narratives

reflected culturally shared assumptions about the nature of literacy. In addition, student entries demonstrated a transformation of contextual elements to textual elements. It was also determined that males and females did not interpret the literary experience differently, a phenomenon which is essential to understanding the literary practices of any group.

Introspection and Journal Writing

The discussion above leads to the conclusion that journal writing is an event during which the writer is actively learning about self: role(s) within culture, expectations and consequences from culture, and how to amend experiences into a useful guide which can be referred to in future dealings with culture. Developmental psychologists (Britton, 1975) believe that the awareness of social values and beliefs which govern behavior ease the transition away from poorly formed systems of cultural responsibilities. Journal writing can serve to refine and re-define the cultural system of beliefs which students have in early life, facilitating growth into the more sophisticated systems achieved through education (Britton, 1975). In addition to the personal knowledge which can be gained, journal writing may provide a vehicle through which students form relationships between one subject and another, from academics to life, from person to person, and from past to present to future. Fulwiler (1987) advocates writing across the curriculum in order to effect a transfer of power from the teacher to the learner, creating a student-centered curriculum (Barnes & Smithson, 1986). Journal writing provides an ideal opportunity for educators of achieve this goal.

The preceding findings exemplify two characteristics of journal writing offered by Jensen (1983): selective memory and chronology revision. These

contribute to the development of a personal myth. This is accomplished when students draw on the past and future in order to explain the present. In this sense, journals become records of facts (operating successfully within reality by establishing standards, striving to improve life, learning to live with family and peers) and myths (defeating formidable opponents; surpassing one's established standards) which define a life - a person's truth. Through this process, journals demonstrate to the writer that the past does not die, but becomes part of an understandable pattern in life (Yerger, 1984).

When journal writing, the author retains the option to ignore or adhere to writing details which influence traditional school writing including establishing the purpose for writing, and the form of writing used to express thoughts. Journals are typically ungraded, and exist as vehicles for voluntary shring of information and feelings. Larson and Merrion (1987) recommend that those who keep journals write as best they can without regard to surface structure, since the primary goal is to facilitate the flow of thought, downplaying excessive attention to mechanics. Typically, journals are written in first person, a phenomenon which facilitates the recording of one's personal history. Murray (1985) addresses the personal advantages that writing in first person allows: detachment for the mind, ideas and feelings. It is through this detachment, that the writer is able to separate self from the written account. The personalized entry becomes a direct way of highlighting the writing as matter of opinion. Burnham (in Fulwiler, 1987) advocates the journal on the merit that it allows the opportunity for students to use and develop higher-order thinking skills while encouraging both self-and psychological-growth. One example of researchers' efforts to identify the patterns and types of

thought processes employed in personal narrative focused on entries written during a time of adaptation. Schwartz (1987), in an attempt to help college students adapt to new living and learning communities, asked freshmen were to write in journals. It was ascertained that the focus of many of the entries was to keep the past alive, rather than to commit to a new life-style. The primary reason for being in college (the academic factor) was rarely included in journal entries. One part of the journal exercises was for students to comment on three assigned readings pertaining to the process of adaptation. Toward the end of the study, students began to reflect their own adaptation to campus life, rather than focusing on the adaptation discussed in the three assigned readings. Schwartz's conclusion was that journals facilitated students' transitions from one stage of life to another.

The results of studies cited in preceding paragraphs indicate that journal writing does indeed address the affective domain. In addition, journals may be used as a forum by which thoughts are organized, feelings are identified, knowledge is recorded, and personal histories are documented. It is because of these characteristics that the personal journal has potential as a tool for facilitating a greater understanding of the transitions which are a part of life, as well as being an appropriate place to connect literary events with life.

Implications for Instruction

Two primary implications may be taken from the preceding discussion: first, that journal writing should be a voluntary activity in which students are encouraged to participate. Second, students may benefit from increased opportunities to make decisions regarding school, social, and independent

activities. By increasing decision-making opportunities while providing and encouraging reflection through journal writing, teachers are facilitating students' awareness of selves within a culture. This knowledge develops similtaneously with increased reading/writing abilities, and possible, positive attitudes toward literacy.

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